

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
28 March 1983

Nicaraguan conflict: how close to civil war?

By James Nelson Goodsell
Latin America correspondent of
The Christian Science Monitor

Civil war may again be brewing in Nicaragua.

Less than four years after the conclusion of the costly war that brought the left-leaning Sandinistas to power, a new struggle for control of the Central American land is shaping up, particularly in the hill country of northern Nicaragua.

It was from those hills, among staunchly independent Nicaraguans, that the Sandinistas launched their successful struggle in the 1970s to end 4 1/2 decades of Somoza-family rule.

And it is from this rugged part of Nicaragua, just 50 miles from the capital city of Managua, that anti-Sandinista Nicaraguan guerrillas are launching a bid to unseat the Sandinista government.

Major fighting between guerrillas and the Sandinistas erupted this past week. Details are sketchy, but these anti-Sandinista forces, composed mostly of one-time Sandinista supporters and former National Guardsmen, may number as many as several thousand. They apparently are well-equipped. Their fighting potential, however, is unknown.

Also unknown is who supports them and who trained them. The ratio of Guardsmen to former Sandinistas is unknown. The presumption is that most of the guerrillas are Nicaraguans and members of the Nicaraguan Democratic Front (FDN), an organization with rightist political views headquartered in Honduras.

But whether the FDN is entirely responsible for the fighting in northern Nicaragua is unclear. FDN spokesmen say they are battling the Sandinistas in the central and northern parts of the country, but deny FDN forces are involved in clashes in northeastern Zelaya Province. At this writing, there also are reports of fighting in southern Nicaragua — and the FDN is apparently not involved.

The guerrillas, therefore, are a bit of an enigma.

There is no enigma about the intensity of fighting. Government and guerrillas agree that it was fierce this past week. The rebel command now claims control of three of Nicaragua's 14 provinces. The Sandinista government does not specifically dispute the claim, but says it has the situation in hand.

Whatever the ebb and flow of the battle now shaping up, the Sandinistas find themselves in the uncomfortable position of warding off a guerrilla insurgency. Although it is less than four years since they exchanged their own battle-stained guerrilla garb for well-pressed olive-drab fatigues, the Sandinistas are on the defensive.

The anti-Sandinista forces can, to some measure, choose where to fight and when to withdraw. The element of surprise is on their side. They also have easy access to food and military supplies, since the provinces they claim to control are near their base camps in Honduras.

What is known about the guerrillas fighting in the north is that they are based in Honduras, trained there, and mounted their invasion from Honduras.

Less is known about the rebel challenge in southern Nicaragua. Anti-Sandinista guerrillas are reported to have entered Nicaragua from Costa Rica at a point less than 50 miles to the south of Managua.

Whether the southern invasion is serious and whether the northern and southern drives are coordinated remains to be seen. If the attacks are coordinated, the rebels may be planning a pincers-like squeeze on the Sandinistas. The struggle threatens to explode into civil war.

The Sandinista leadership in Managua is taking the attacks seriously. It has put the country on a war footing, mobilized reserves, attempted to stir public fervor against the invaders, and appealed to the United Nations for assistance. The Sandinistas lay much of the blame for the fighting on the United States. They claim that the invaders appear to have received both US military and Central Intelligence Agency training.

One of the big quandaries at the moment is where the people of Nicaragua stand in the struggle. At the time the Sandinistas fought to overthrow the US-backed Somoza dynasty, an overwhelming majority of Nicaraguans supported them.

Some of that support has dissipated during four years of Sandinista government. Still, the vast majority of Nicaraguans do not appear to want any return of a Somoza-style dictatorship. Many Nicaraguans continue to resent the Somoza rule and may waver over backing a guerrilla drive mounted by former Somoza National Guardsmen.

At the same time, there is a growing legion of former Sandinista allies who now oppose the Sandinista government. These include Edén Pastora Gómez, a folk hero of the earlier civil war, and Alfonso Robelo Callejas, the businessman who was part of the first Sandinista junta. Whether these two are involved in the reported invasion of Nicaragua from Costa Rica, however, is unclear.